

Falling Short of Feminism: Why Modern Retellings of Fairy Tales Perpetuate Negative Stereotypes of the Aging Woman

In November of 2007, the Disney Film *Enchanted* was selected as a “Critic’s Pick” by the movie reviewers of the *New York Times*. In an article written on the 21st of that month titled “Someday My Prince Will. . . Uh, Make That a Manhattan Lawyer,” Times writer Manohla Dargis gushes that,

Enchanted, an unexpectedly delightful revisionist fairy tale from, of all places, Walt Disney Pictures, doesn’t radically rewrite every bumper cliché about girls of all ages and their dreams. But for a satisfying stretch, the film works its magic largely by sending up, at times with a wink, at times with a hard nudge, some of the very stereotypes that have long been this company’s profitable stock in trade.

Dargis then states that *Enchanted* in fact espouses revolutionary and modern ideas because the princess can save her true love all by herself. Dargis also claims that the Disney company is poking fun at itself all throughout the film, which she considers something of a surprise from the profit-driven corporate Disney of today.

While *Enchanted* and Disney’s most recent cinematic release, *The Princess and the Frog*, certainly are retellings of the classic Disney tale which promote modern ideas of independence and power in young women, they do not address, and in fact perpetuate, one of the longest-standing stereotypes of both the Disney canon and the Western fairy and folk tale: older women with power have no place in society. This can be seen in alternating forms. First, there is the aging beauty Nerissa (*Enchanted*) who is jealous, evil, and resentful of a younger woman (and her stepson) rising up to take her place and will do anything to keep from losing her power. Second, there is the aging voodoo queen, Mama Odie, (*The Princess and the Frog*) who is beneficent and helpful to the heroine of the story, but who is still not included in society. She is feared and lives deep within the swamps, stuck in the part of other.

Most studies of fairy tale narratives focus, like Darghis, on their portrayal of the heroine and what message that sends young girls. It is often claimed that in the revisionist tales that have become popular within the past fifteen years, there are women being granted power within society. Little girls are now being taught through the portrayal of these heroines to believe they have some purpose in life besides sitting around waiting for Prince Charming to rescue them. This is a step in the right direction towards a truly feminist version of the fairy tale. However, the portrayal of older women and of the relationship between the heroine and older women also sends powerful messages about identity. The exclusion of older women teaches young women that they can only have a place in society when they are young and sexually viable. When they are no longer capable of reproduction, they need to fade out of society or risk being regarded as “evil” if they try to maintain the place that they have worked to establish. In turn, this exclusion implies that older women have not been role models of empowerment and therefore lack importance in the development of this quality in younger women. Instead, the model of empowerment is generally embodied in the heroine’s male partner.

In this paper, I will demonstrate that the traditional fairy tale’s negative portrayal of older women remains largely unchallenged by current popular revisions. This negative portrayal persists despite claims that modern versions of these tales are about the empowerment of women. This, in turn, is indicative of a continuous trend within society to marginalize older women and put them in the place of other by depicting them as isolated hags or sexually predatory “cougars.” I will track the evolution of this stereotype from early fairy tales to classic Disney movies and finally to their “feminist” revisions.

Aging Women Lack a Place in the Discussion

The important impact fairy tales have on children and the society to which they belong is frequently studied today in a cross-section of fields such as psychology, education, and sociology as well as in literary studies.ⁱ The general consensus is that while there are those that “have reported that fairy tales are not an integral part of children’s culture, and therefore, their messages are of little consequence, this dismissive attitude underestimates the pervasive power of the tales” (Parsons 135). It is currently accepted that “third- and fourth-grade readers use the books they read to better understand their own lived worlds” (Galda and Beach 68). Therefore, the world children believe they live in revolves around young, pretty women (sometimes empowered, sometimes powerless) and their search for their true love who is handsome, wise, and (often) wealthy. Aging men are often portrayed in this world as kindly and wise. Aging women are either ignored, as can be seen through the complete absence of older female characters in most of these tales, or they are vilified as in the examples of the Stepmother in *Snow White*, and Queen Nerissa in *Enchanted*. Through these tales, children are being force-fed the principles of our youth-driven, age-fearing society. These principles leave no place of importance to aging women.

These new tales and their classical predecessors are part of the hegemonic principles that dominate western literature. The existing patriarchal views and perceptions are passed down to children of increasingly younger ages and manipulated to form their perception of gender identity. When classic fairy tale narratives are currently being studied, most often, gender is the topic of discussion in these studies. However, this discussion of gender looks at how the young, vulnerable female characters interact with the virile, conquering, ultra-masculine hero. While it is without a doubt important to identify the gender-stereotyping that defines women as young, beautiful, and most importantly, submissive, the portrayal of older women in these tales is rarely

looked at in these studies. When do young children see an example of a strong, older woman who is not evil, or not magical, and therefore not human? The answer is they don't. From an early age they are taught to see the older woman in a position of power as evil or as other. They are taught to believe that older women have no place in society. This is what is implied and reaffirmed by their absence in all forms or positions of societally-recognized power in the Disney canon and in western fairy and folk tales.

This is because few of the older women mentioned in tales from patriarchal societies, with the occasional exception of a powerless and doddering grandmother or nurse, are submissive. Thus, the gender-bias that is so obvious in the tales of the young, beautiful women is not as easily seen when an older woman is mentioned. However, the focus that has been put on the expected submissiveness of young women could as easily move to the expected aggressiveness of the older woman. Older women in these tales, as stated earlier, are portrayed as helpful "fairy godmothers", i.e. not human, who aid the heroine in her quest to fulfill her dreams of lifelong servitude to her dashing hero, or they become the villains. Female fairy tale villains are either portrayed as aging, seductive beauties who are bitterly jealous of their young rivals, or as ugly, withered, crone-like hags. What either example of this type of villain has in common, however, is that she is no longer young. Her fertility is either waning or gone entirely – as is her time as an object of sexual desire to men. The aging witch (whether beautiful or haggard) became easily accepted as a villain in these stories.ⁱⁱ

Traditional Stereotypes

Traditional fairy tales almost universally depict assertive older women as threats to the younger female heroines. There are innumerable negative examples of the aging woman in

traditional western folk and fairy tales. “Most such tales have filtered through centuries of patriarchal culture and show little respect for women, except as young and beautiful “princesses” (Walker, FFT, Introduction). The older woman has lost her value in this society because she is losing, or has lost, her sexual desirability, and her ability to procreate.ⁱⁱⁱ Unless this woman showed willingness to step aside from a position of power or importance, she was cast into the position of witch or stepmother. There is a definite message being sent through these traditional stories that a woman who refuses to take the place defined for her by patriarchal society is evil. Her desire for personal autonomy is shown as a malevolent disregard for the accepted social norms. She is expected to move to the fringes of her world, regardless of what her potential contribution to that world may be. It is implied that this bucking of the system will have detrimental consequences for the generation that is intended to replace her. The negative portrayal of elderly women in these stories is indicative of the societal stigma perpetrated against aging women in patriarchal societies.

Continually, aging women are cast in the role of evil witch or wicked stepmother. In the complete collection of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* the reader is shown the wicked stepmothers of Cinderella, and The True Bride; the witches/sorceresses of Rapunzel, Hansel and Gretel, Sweetheart Roland, The Old Woman in the Wood, Jorinda and Joringel, The Six Servants, The Crystal Ball, The Blue Light, and The Old Witch; the malevolent fairy of The Sleeping Beauty, and the combination wicked stepmother, dabbler in black magic of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. In each of these stories, the aging woman is at best engaged in a struggle to maintain her place that results in the displacement or death of the younger people of the story. At worst, she is portrayed as malevolence itself by enchanting, harming, or even cannibalizing the young victims that come across her path.

Two of the best-known traditional fairy tales that provide evidence of the aging woman as evil/other are “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” and “Hansel and Gretel.” Each of these tales contains many of the same stereotypes of aging women. In both, there is the role of evil stepmother, and witch. The stepmother feels that the child(ren) must be removed for her place to be maintained. The witch attempts to kill the child(ren) for her own malevolent reasons. These women are also all well-past childbearing age and show no proclivity for nurturing motherhood or retirement from society.

In a story only six pages long, Hansel and Gretel is jammed with malice aimed at the aging, and hungry, woman. The first the reader is introduced to is the stepmother of the children. Due to a famine, the family is close to starvation and the woman proposes that the children be taken into the forest and left to die so that she and her husband might live. Immediately the reader feels horror at the “unnatural monster” of a woman who would leave children to starve in the forest, while she in turn eats their share in the safety and comfort of home. It is interesting to notice at this point that the reluctant father is not vilified although he goes along with this plan and willingly leaves his children to starve. There is a feeling of vindication when the children return home safely the first time, and then a feeling of sorrow when they truly do become lost the second time their stepmother takes them into the forest.

The stepmother, however, is the least monstrous of the older women portrayed in this tale. The children’s adventure into horror is about to truly begin as they meet the true witch of the story, a grisly caricature of evil disguised as a kindly old woman who lives in a house made of bread, cake, and sugar. While the children originally feel soothed by the idea of being taken care of by a grandmotherly woman (a submissive woman who knows that her place is at home and her job is to take care of the generations that come after herself), they are soon to discover

that they have left one horror to find one that is much worse:

The old woman, although her behavior was so kind, was a wicked witch, who lay in wait for children, and had built the little house on purpose to entice them. When they were once inside she used to kill them, cook them, and eat them, and then it was a feat-day with her. The witch's eyes were red, and she could not see very far, but she had a keen scent, like the beasts, and knew very well when human creatures were near. (Grimm 106)

Automatically, the old woman/witch becomes a character of intense horror. Not only does she possess bestial sub-human qualities such as the above average sense of smell, but she indulges in the societal taboo of cannibalism. In addition, not content with the captivity and eventual eating of the children, the witch also enforces a torturous slavery on Gretel, who must prepare her brother for slaughter. This is not just a story of a wicked witch to keep children from wandering in the woods. This is very much a reflection of a societal fear that old women would feed and leach off of society after they ceased to be productive in and of themselves. The young female character is particularly threatened by the malevolence of the witch. Not only does she face the horrors of captivity, but she is also forced to slave for her and be an active participant in the cannibalization of her brother. It could be said that she is being prepared for her own displacement from society, which began when her stepmother had her left in the woods to die.

The moral compensation that is so important in these tales, however, is met when the witch is overthrown by the clever (i.e. younger and quicker) Gretel. The witch is forced to endure the fate that she had originally intended for the children, and justice is served and the wheels of patriarchal society keep turning in their determined path. The evil old witch has been overthrown and is no longer leaching off the life force of the young. The witch had continued to be a problem for society even after she was removed from society by being forced deep into the forest. The conventional solutions of distance and poverty did not render her helpless, and for her to lose her power, she had to be killed. This moral compensation is further developed when the children return home and their stepmother is dead as well. Their youth has overcome age,

and both instances of the non-maternal feminine have been killed.

In “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, the evil of stepmother and witch is combined into one character. The witch/queen of this story is yet another example of an older rival that must be overthrown for the young heroine to thrive. As long as the queen lives, Snow White is at risk. This is because the queen does not choose to subvert herself to the role that society has decided she should have. She does not wish to relegate herself to dowager, and she does not wish to give up the beauty that has given her the only power in her life. Because of this she is vilified. As Barbara Walker states on page 19 of *Feminist Fairy Tales*, “the wicked stepmother is ubiquitous in European fairy tales. . . Snow White’s stepmother seems to have been vilified because (a) she resented being less beautiful than Snow White, and (b) she practiced witchcraft.” The story implies that the threat to Snow White exists because her aging stepmother is so jealous of her beauty (and the fact that Snow White will replace her as the object of men’s sexual desire) that she will not allow her to live. This woman is portrayed as a vain, aging beauty that apparently has little to do but gaze into her magic mirror all day and inquire of it who is the most beautiful. When Snow White is too young to be perceived as a rival, the Queen ignores her (also demonstrating that she is nonmaternal). However, as she approaches maturity, she grows lovelier and the Queen is told by her magic mirror that she is no longer the most beautiful woman in the kingdom.

This gave the Queen a great shock, and she became yellow and green with envy, and from that hour her heart turned against Snow-white and she hated her. And envy and pride like ill weeds grew in her heart higher every day, until she had no peace day or night. At last she sent for a huntsman, and said, “Take the child out into the woods, so that I may set eyes on her no more. You must put her to death, and bring me her heart for a token. (Grimm 332)

Not only is the Queen vilified for envy and vanity, she is turned into a cold-blooded murderer, witch, and potential cannibal because when she is brought what she believes to be Snow White’s

heart, she had it cooked and ate it. In addition, the Queen occupied a powerful position that she maintained by her sorcery. The Queen in and of herself overthrows every condition that society has placed on older women. She wants to maintain beauty and power. She practices magic, she does not have children of her own, and she refuses to move out of the way so that someone younger and more fertile can take her place.^{iv}

When the Queen's attempted hit on Snow White is unsuccessful, she takes the situation in hand herself and turns to the "women's weapons" of suffocation and poison. Ultimately, she is successful and Snow White lies as if dead after biting into a poisoned apple. The tale downplays the success of the weapons of subterfuge that "women" employ such as poison, considering them cheating, unmanly ways to attempt to eradicate a problem. It is much more straightforward to go at someone with a sword and scream out your intentions and give them a chance to stop you. The tale, while mentioning that Snow White is repeatedly cautioned not to talk to or take anything from strangers, also does not emphasize that she brings on her own doom because she has been so lacking in the experience that the Queen has in spades, that she does not have the self-preservation instincts necessary to protect herself from an older, and more clever, rival.

The reader is meant to be horrified at this unnatural woman who thinks more of her beauty and position in the kingdom than of her stepdaughter. She has broken two of the cardinal feminine conventions of fairy tales: she has not allowed herself to be marginalized in favor of a younger, more beautiful (not to mention still reproductive) woman, and she was never especially motherly. Instead, her main concerns are maintaining her beauty (and power), and somehow during all that mirror-gazing she also finds time to run the kingdom since Snow White's father is apparently dead. Painted as little more than an evil, jealous harpy, the Queen gets her

comeuppance in the end, however, when Snow White is raised from the sleep of death by a prince (the description of the kiss he places on her dead lips more than suggestive of necrophilia). Horror of horrors, the mirror once again tells the queen that she is no longer the most beautiful.

O Queen, although you are of beauty rare,
The young bride is a thousand times more fair.
Then she railed and cursed, and was beside herself with disappointment and anger. First she thought she would not go to the wedding; but then she felt she should have no peace until she went and saw the bride. And when she saw her she knew her for Snow-white, and could not stir from the place for anger and terror. For they had ready red-hot iron shoes, in which she had to dance until she fell down dead. (Grimm 338)

Not only does she lose her powerful position as the most beautiful woman in the world, but she is tortured to death for daring to try and keep her place in society when someone younger was there to take her place.

The Disney Corporation has also had a hand in perpetuating these older tales throughout the 20th Century and inundating several generations of children with these patriarchal ideals. The first Disney full-length feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), portrayed Snow White's stepmother the queen as a sorceress of immense power who had achieved her position through the combination of her beauty and black magic. When the queen is introduced to the viewer it is as a cold, haughty beauty wrapped head to foot in robes of state that culminate atop her head with a gold crown. Every possible flaw is covered with her dark, figure-hugging clothing. The viewer only sees her subtly made-up face and her hands. She is painted as jealous and vindictive, afraid of losing her power to her stepdaughter who is becoming of marriageable age and capable of childbirth while she is rapidly approaching the age of menopause.

The queen knowingly separated herself from the world which she wishes to rule. The only human interaction the viewer sees her have is with the huntsman she tells to kill Snow

White. Her only acknowledged companion is a large raven that one can only assume is her familiar as all scenes with the queen focus on her gazing into her mirror or performing some act of witchcraft hidden in the bowels of the castle dungeon. Her behavior is antisocial and certainly not acceptable in a patriarchal world where a woman should be busy with productive work that provides for the comfort of man regardless of her age or position.^v The role of an aging woman is to not only move aside for youth, but to support and succor that youth in order that it may succeed.

It is interesting to note that there is no hint in either the original fairy tale, or in any of the retellings that followed, that the queen would be in danger of losing her power or her crown if her stepdaughter were not more beautiful than she. This makes the entire situation less a power struggle and more of a beauty contest. This makes the queen's attempt to kill her rival reminiscent of the final scene of the 2000 film *Miss Congeniality* in which the former beauty queen played by Candace Bergen attempts to blow up the current winner. The reasoning that this character gives for her actions is that she had dedicated her entire life to these beauty contests and she was going to be removed from them, cast aside much like it appears the queen of *Snow White* fears that she will be. This aspect makes the queen a more petty character and implies that her every action is based on personal narcissism. Unlike traditional beauty queens who seek beauty for the pleasure of men, her focus on beauty is a perversion as it is entirely for herself.^{vi}

The beauty contest aspect takes an odd turn when in order to kill Snow White the queen knowingly turns herself into an ugly, old hag. While one assumes that if the queen can turn herself into a crone that she can equally turn herself back into her true form, it is startling that one so obsessed with personal beauty would give it away so quickly. However, the disguise of

the crone can also be seen as a rejection of the public's use of her beauty. Her beauty is hers alone and not to be shared with the world. In addition to this validation of her narcissism, in the form of the crone she would be an overlooked part of society and would not be considered a dangerous threat. Beauty was what she craved and was willing to kill for, but in order to successfully get rid of her rival, it was necessary that she temporarily give up that beauty.

In 1959 Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* also portrayed a villainous older woman who is evil for the sake of being evil, the fairy Maleficent. There is no psychological depth to her; she symbolizes antipathy to youth and the future. This character is an over-the-top example of stereotypical female pettiness. There is never any mention that at one time Maleficent had been a beauty whose aspirations were disappointed. Instead, the viewer learns that she is miffed because she was not invited to the princess's birth celebration. She becomes a threat to the future because instead of punishing the parents for overlooking her, she punishes the princess and condemns her to death before she can marry and produce the next generation.

Maleficent is a caricature of evil. Like the evil queen of *Snow White*, she is adorned head to toe in voluminous black robes. Atop her head she wears a horned headdress that immediately invokes thoughts of the Christian Satan. Like the queen of *Snow White*, she does not purposefully interact with society and through this automatically sets herself aside as other. Maleficent, however, is even more enveloped in black magic. While she also has a raven as a familiar, Maleficent also surrounds herself with an army of horrible gargoyles and goblins that act out her evil impulses and desires. Nothing about the character of Maleficent rings true because she is an archetypal character. She is the evil fairy.

New, Improved, and Fortified with Empowerment

In recent years the attempts to retell the traditional tales have taken various forms, all of which have been touted as feminist through the empowerment of the heroine. The young heroine has been successfully empowered and takes an active role in her own salvation. There is no longer the expectation of a heroine being little more than a beautiful, empty-headed companion for the male protagonist. In fact, women of less-than-ideal physical beauty are now often the heroines rather than the villains. What is most problematic about these retellings is that the patriarchal values that originally put older women in the position of villain are still firmly in place. The older woman is still always seen as the villain or as a powerless foil for the young heroine.

In the past two decades, the Disney Corporation has been a large producer and distributor of such retellings. They have retold traditional fairy tales like *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), as well as the semi-factual legends of *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998). In each of these retellings the main character is a strong, independent, young woman. Even more recently, Disney has begun coming up with original scripts with the same type of strong, young female protagonists such as *Enchanted* (2007) and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009).

These two original scripts, *Enchanted* and *The Princess and the Frog* are especially celebrated as throwing off all the original conventions of the fairy tale. They are not tales of helpless princesses sitting around waiting to be saved by a prince. However, the patriarchal fairy tale values still triumph in the end. In both, the heroine rescues her prince, or in the case of *Enchanted* her lawyer, and ends up married to live “happily ever after.” The male protagonist is thrown to the side as the princess thinks and solves problems for herself. However, there is never a question that the female protagonist will end up with a man at the end of the story. It is

also interesting to note that in both of these “modern” tales, the only older women of any power are either villains or separated from society.

It is true that *Enchanted* does irreverently spoof the classic Disney princess tales such as *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Cinderella*. The costume choices and hairstyles for both Giselle and Prince Edward allude back to the costuming of Aurora/Briar Rose and Prince Phillip from *Sleeping Beauty*. Queen Nerissa is reminiscent of both the wicked queen/stepmother of *Snow White* and Maleficent of *Sleeping Beauty*. Without question the symbols of these original films are used. Giselle is followed around by helpful animals (a la *Snow White*) leaves behind a (faux) glass slipper at the ball (*Cinderella*), she takes a bite from a poisoned apple (*Snow White* again) and falls into a deep sleep from which she can only be awakened by true love’s kiss (*Sleeping Beauty*). However, *Enchanted* also blatantly borrows the misogynistic look at the aging female villain and intensifies it.

It is implied from the start of the film that Queen Nerissa is an unreasonably jealous, narcissistic woman who does not act without thinking in her own best interests that are clearly opposed to those of the young heroine. Foreshadowing of this unreasonable jealousy in the opening scene allows the viewer to know prior to their introduction to her that she will be the villain of the story. Prince Edward hears Giselle and the queen’s servant, Nathaniel says “All the years of troll chasing, keeping him from meeting a girl, oh the queen, the queen’s not going to like this.” From this one line, the viewer becomes aware that the queen does not want Edward to find a girl to fall in love with, and that the queen is going to be opposed to the fairy tale convention of everyone living happily ever after. The introduction to Queen Nerissa (played by a vamped-up Susan Sarandon who hams up the role of comedic villainess) only solidifies this

impression. Without any kind of background story one learns that the queen automatically assumes that if Giselle and Edward are to marry that Giselle will attempt to take her crown and her throne. What is not explained is how Edward's marrying will make any difference to her throne as he is already the prince and she is *his* stepmother, not Giselle's. Nerissa's malevolent jealousy is shown as irrational and unfounded, bordering on hysteria. Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* and the evil queen of *Snow White* are referenced when in a towering rage Nerissa explodes into a pillar of fire and then transforms into a crone. It is in this guise of helpful crone that she lures Giselle to the well and then pushes her in, literally pushing what she recognizes as her threat out of the way.

The concept of narcissism is further displayed as Nerissa is shown willfully stepping out of the accepted bounds of society. She displays little true desire for relevance, and instead comes across as an attention-seeking diva. When moving from the animated world to that of live action, she doesn't just appear, she explodes out of the manhole. She literally and figuratively stops traffic with both her appearance and her magic. She is not only willing to draw attention to herself and her abilities, but seems desirous of it. When others are horrified, she laughs. She is not willing to quietly fade into the background (a perversion for an aging beauty queen) and disregards anything that does not fit into her vision of what her world should be.

By comparing the costuming in the animated and live action portions of *Enchanted* the viewer becomes aware that what is acceptable in animation is unacceptable in the real world. The costuming and makeup choices for Queen Nerissa when she is in her true form and when she is disguised as the crone have misogynistic layers that imply that Queen Nerissa moving outside of the dictates of society in an animated world is amusing. However, Nerissa in the real world has lost her soft edges and is clearly delineated as either unacceptable role model of a sub-

culture or bestial sub-human. The animated portion of *Enchanted* provides homage to the costuming conventions of the genre, and is softened by the fact that the viewer knows that this is not real, this is an animated representation of humanity. In this animated portion, in her true form Queen Nerissa has the cold beauty of the evil queen of *Snow White* while effecting the colors and headdress of Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*. In her disguise as crone, she is nearly a reproduction of the evil queen's hag in *Snow White*. The live action portion of the film, however, takes on aspects and allusions of the modern world, giving the costume choices new significance.

As the crone, the costuming remains the same across both the animated and live action portions. While one can see why Prince Edward would describe the woman as "a wicked old hag", there is nothing truly revolting about her appearance. This same appearance is more horrifying in live action, however. Every wrinkle is deeply embedded, every wart and mole embellished with hair. The actual hair on the crone's head is unkempt and slatternly. The few teeth in the crone's mouth lean at odd angles, jagged and yellow. Her fingernails are long, yellow talons. On successfully poisoning Giselle she flings her over her shoulder as if she weighed nothing to carry her out of the sight of Edward and Robert. All of these aspects hint at a subhuman, bestial nature that is apart from accepted society.

In her true form, the queen's clothing that looks as if it would have to be painted on in the animated portion becomes fetish/bondage wear in live action. The bodice is clearly recognizable as a bustier/corset. Combined with the platform 5-inch heels one is automatically reminded of either a dominatrix or an exotic dancer, implying that Nerissa is at least sexually aggressive if not an outright predator. This clothing choice also hints at the idea that she may be promiscuous. A recognizably virtuous woman would not be attired in fetish/bondage gear. In addition, the

portrayal of aging beauty is softened by animation that plays up angles and bone structure. The aging factor, however, is made luridly obvious in the live action which plays up every possible line and wrinkle in the face of the actress. This difference seems to imply that when an aging beautiful woman is a villain in a story, it is acceptable, although she will eventually receive her punishment. However, this same character is unacceptable in real life and is by costume placed in the part of other and is not an integral part of society.

Whether her costuming is viewed as a stripper or a dominatrix, Queen Nerissa's live action presence is highly sexualized and dominant. Her obvious aging and refusal to consider stepping down from her throne make her threatening to a society that intends to push her out of the way for a younger rival. She is a predator that uses sex to achieve her goals. This is referenced throughout the film, particularly through her interaction with Nathaniel who she manipulates through promises and innuendos of sexual gratification. This can be seen when she says (speaking of Prince Edward attempting to find and bring back Giselle), "she'd just love to come crawling back here to steal my crown, cast me aside like so much royal rubbish. Oh, I do wish there was someone who cared enough for me to go after him. Oh a man like that, strong and brave. I'd do anything for him." This is not said, but purred at Nathaniel, who falls at her feet. Her sexual dominance makes him putty that she can mould at will. It is also depicted in a way that makes it appear ludicrous and comical. Her predatory sexuality is not acceptable, society expects the innocent submissiveness of Giselle. Her heavily made-up, lined face is shown centimeters away from that of the slavish and dog-like Nathaniel who pants with lust at her every suggestion. The image is then superimposed with the wide-eyed, fresh-faced Giselle smiling adoringly at Robert and restoring the natural order. Natural order is further restored when Nathaniel all of a sudden sees through her wiles and tells the world that she is lying,

murderous, treacherous, selfish, and evil.

The sexual domination displayed by Nerissa is evidence of a new type of stereotype being aimed at older women, that of the “cougar.” While in early Disney movies the aging female villains were by and large sexless regardless of whether they were considered beauties or not, in the role of Nerissa one can see the recent tendency to look at aging women as highly oversexed or “cougars”.^{vii} In general the buzz about the “cougar” is considered positive and looks at a shift in demographics where older women are dating younger men. In those who seriously study this demographic shift there is a realization that the shift is occurring because of societal changes. Despite everything aging women are slowly gaining a voice. Instead of recognizing the empowerment of older women dating younger men, in recent media the focus has been on the cougar as a “comically desperate predator-seductresses” (Kershaw, 1). Through portrayals of characters such as that of Nerissa, the growing voice of empowerment is being mocked and spoofed. Nerissa’s sexuality is not regarded as healthy. Instead it is comically treated as predatory, putting her on the level of animal not that of human.

Portraying Nerissa as a predator in the live action portion of *Enchanted* makes it easy for her character to be disenfranchised. Every aspect of her behavior points to something not quite human. When she is exposed as the villain further cements the viewer’s opinion that she is something other than human. She hisses and spits in Edward’s face. Nathaniel addresses her as “you viper”. She admits herself that she is spiteful and vindictive, but denies craziness implying that every move is thought out and calculated. She is categorized as cold, unfeeling, and reptilian and then proves that this is indeed the case when yet again she explodes into a pillar of fire and turns into a dragon (once again like Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*). Nerissa as a dragon is covered in scales. The dragon’s neck is long, flexible, and snakelike strengthening the idea that

has been planted in the mind of the viewer that she is a viper, a cold-blooded, poisonous reptile.

It is because Nerissa has been identified as a predatory (bestial) older woman that she is not only able to be conquered, but is also why she must be conquered. She figuratively falls from her place in society as she literally falls to her death from the top of a building. While she is still in her dragon form like Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*, this scene is intensely reminiscent of the death of the evil queen in *Snow White*. The queen in *Snow White* attempts to crush the dwarves with a large boulder then falls and the boulder crushes her. Nerissa falls from the top of the building that she has purposely scaled holding Robert captive, to lure Giselle into a trap where she will die as well. In addition, she is crushed by part of a building that breaks off in her fall. Her death establishes a return to a society in which “happily-ever-after” is possible.

Enchanted ends with Giselle establishing a dress shop for little girls where every little girl can become a princess. It is reaffirmed that youth triumphs over age.

The Princess and the Frog, on the other hand, is much more subtle about the disenfranchisement of aging women. The role of Tiana, the heroine of *The Princess and the Frog*, is a powerful example of a shift in the ideas of what young (and in this case African-American) women can do. Through hard work, Tiana is perched on the edge of achieving her dreams. A slight wrench is thrown into her plans by the entrance of Prince Naveen who through his own selfishness has been turned into a frog, and gets her transformed into the same, by the young male villain, the Shadow Man, who does not break the fairy-tale stereotype that aging men are wise and helpful. Despite this attempt to create a fairy tale that transcends the limits of gender, class, and race, the tendency to put the older woman in the position of other is still prevalent. *The Princess and the Frog* does not transcend the stereotypical limits of age coupled with femininity. This can be seen in the very beginning of the film where the only female

character over the age of adolescence is the mother of the heroine, Tiana.

Tiana's mother is a non-character who functions as exposition of the heroine's background. A seamstress of African-American descent in New Orleans during the first few decades of the 20th century, the mother provides an example of the work ethic that the heroine later develops, but has no personal power. At the end of a long day of work, she quietly goes to the back of the streetcar for her journey home. Living in a shotgun house on the wrong side of town, she submissively travels to the Garden District and the French Quarter to serve her wealthy, white clients. This character is automatically in the position of other because she is of the wrong race, the wrong social class, and the wrong age to hold an important role in her society. At best, the role of the mother is a supportive foil for the character of the heroine.

Any older woman of power must be separated from society. It is interesting to note that there is a benevolent older woman with power in *The Princess and the Frog*, Mama Odie. Benevolent or not, however, Mama Odie is cast firmly in a position of other. The first mention of her comes from the alligator Louis, who immediately mentions that she does voodoo. He is fearful of her and her abilities despite the fact that nothing we are ever shown paints her in a malevolent light. As Louis says, "(she's) the voodoo queen of the bayou. She got magic and spells. All kind of hoodoo." Nothing throughout the entire film indicates that there is reason to fear her, but a very real fear of so much feminine power embodied in one so old is present.

There is a reason this woman lives so far from civilization in the "deepest, darkest part of the bayou." Her power is feared, and because of this she cannot be a part of society despite the fact that she has never done anything to harm that society. The fear is overlooked when it becomes apparent that she might be useful, but there is never any indication that Mama Odie

would be welcomed into New Orleans despite how helpful she proves to be. This separation would be less noticeable if the Shadow Man, who has run afoul of the law on more than one occasion, were ostracized as well. He, however, is part of New Orleans society, even if as a suspect part. He has the power to move through the city with impunity, while Mama Odie is buried in the bayou, and dug up only when she can be of service to someone.

Benevolent power does not mean unequivocal acceptance of an older female character. On first introduction, it becomes obvious to the viewer that Mama Odie has incredible power. She banishes the evil spirits of the Shadow Man with a wave of her walking stick, despite the fact that she is “a 197-year-old blind woman.” She is on a first-name basis with the wildlife of the bayou. This shows more interesting dimensions of her power. Until Mama Odie’s interaction with Ray, Louis, Tiana and Naveen, no other human had the ability to understand the communications of the animals. Despite this, there is nothing in her physical appearance to automatically indicate that this would be the case. She is a tiny, plump old woman, bent and blind with age, although certainly spry for her physical condition.

The establishment of Mama Odie as a witch is very subtly cultivated and expressed in a way that makes her seem nonthreatening. When she searches for the answer to help Tiana and Naveen, she stirs her gumbo in a bathtub and says, “Gumbo, gumbo in the pot, we need a princess, what you got?” Then a vision pops up in the pot. This scene is eerily reminiscent of the evil queen in *Snow White* gazing into her magic mirror and querying, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the fairest one of all?” It is never stated that Mama Odie is a witch, but this scene establishes that idea in the mind of any viewer who has also seen *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. There is an ominous undertone despite her comic appearance and actions.

This ominous undertone is continued and the necessity of her separation from society made clear. This is first evidenced by her choice of pet. She carries a snake that clearly is not native to North America, but is either a python or boa constrictor. Not only does the snake serve as a phallic symbol and serve as a tie to sexuality for the otherwise sexless Mama Odie, but this particular type of snake is also a reference to voodoo ceremonies, particularly those of Marie Laveau the feared voodoo-queen of New Orleans. The snake clearly serves to make the viewer aware of the potential of power that Mama Odie has through her ties with this African-based religion. It subconsciously reaffirms the idea that Mama Odie is indeed a witch.

Her position as witch/outsider is further evidenced in the decrepit squalor of her living quarters and her attitude towards money. Acceptable members of society live in squeaky clean cottages or shotgun houses. Mama Odie, however, cooks and casts spells in a bathtub. Horror of horrors, she also declares that money isn't important firmly establishing that she is not a member of the capitalist society of New Orleans in the 1920's.

Despite her supposed awesome power, in the end Mama Odie is shown as having no power in the outcome of the heroine and hero. While Mama Odie is benevolent to the heroine and hero, she is not directly responsible for their success. She helps them, but does not give them clear answers telling them to, "dig a little deeper" within themselves. In the end, it is the united youth of Tiana and Naveen that triumph over the Shadow Man and the spell that has turned them into frogs. In their final triumph as they take their hard-earned place in society, Mama Odie is curiously absent.

Enchanted and *The Princess and the Frog* are both critically-acclaimed, successful movies that clearly establish older women in the part of outsider or villain despite the claims that

they promote feminism and equal status for everyone. While these retellings focus less on the beauty aspect than the older versions, it is still apparent that the appearance of being the most desirable reproductive age will make girls more attractive to men, and thus, more important to society as a whole. From the continued reading and viewing of the traditional tales little girls are taught that they must be beautiful. From the new, supposedly “feminist” tales they learn that for their dreams to come true they must be the young “princess”, espousing a particular gentility and idea of beauty. While it is true that the retellings are less likely to proclaim the heroine’s beauty, in both *Enchanted* and *The Princess and the Frog*, the heroines fit the current ideal of feminine beauty.^{viii}

This is not particularly surprising in modern society where children are taught that to age is to lose value. Girls, in particular learn to value the beauty and sexuality that appear in a woman’s late teens and early twenties. This is the age all little girls can’t wait to be, and all adult women wish to maintain. There is a billion dollar beauty industry built around the attempt of women to appear between the ages of 18 and 25 forever, whether they are 13 or 60. This is forcing sexuality on young girls at increasingly younger ages and at the same time implying that sexuality after this age is abhorrent further demonstrating the comicality of the woman perceived as a “cougar”.^{ix}

There are few role models for little girls as this attitude towards aging is seen in every aspect of our media. “The law doesn’t murder witches any longer, but modern society does eliminate elder women in a sense. They are made invisible. They rarely appear on those mythic mirrors of our culture, movie and television screens” (Walker, TC:WWP, 30). While some of the Hollywood stereotypes are changing, roles for female actresses are few and far between after they turn 40, unless it is a supporting role such as mother or grandmother or as the antagonist.

Very rarely is the woman over 40 the protagonist.

Madonna has proven to be one of the few female music pop stars to make a splash past 40, and while the artist claims that she has not had plastic surgery, there has been obvious effort on the part of the star to maintain a youthful appearance. More often these days, however, the spotlight is claimed by girls in their late teens who wear provocative clothing and writhe around the stage like exotic dancers. In magazines, models as young as 13 are pictured in what is supposed to be adult clothing, putting out a standard of beauty that very few adult women with women's bodies can attain. Even alternative media sources like comic books (which actually portray women in positions of power) don't look at the older, powerful woman. Instead they focus on the beautiful and well-endowed young women as sources of female power. There is still no crone.

Instead, women of age have begun to rely on solutions such as plastic surgery and Botox to appear eternally youthful. While internally they may be 75, it is only acceptable for older women to appear if they look 40. This willful manipulation and destruction of the human body is considered sexy and liberating for aging women. No one seems to consider that it would be much more liberating to be granted the freedom to age naturally, to grow older in body as well as mind. Aging women in western society have to fulfill the role of a particular construct or they are ignored or vilified. ^x

Stories such as "Snow White" and "Hansel and Gretel" along with movies such as *Enchanted* and *The Princess and the Frog* serve as a training ground for the children who hear and view them. These stories enforce the idea that to grow old as a woman is unacceptable and should be avoided at all costs. The views that they learn through absorbing these offerings of western culture will stay with them throughout their lives.

Today, America is a society that already worships youth and places aging women in the role of outsider. Subtly impressing this idea on children through humorous cartoons where everyone “lives happily-ever-after” makes it an acceptable and agreeable part of their world and promotes the continuation of separating aging woman into the part of other.

ⁱ In *The Witch Must Die: the Hidden Meaning of Fairy Tales*, Sheldon Cashdan looks at fairy tales from a psychological perspective and concludes that in these tales the psychology of children’s morality is at play. The fairy tales are simply there to teach children what is and what is not socially-acceptable behavior.

ⁱⁱ Perhaps it is not surprising that aging women were villainized in fairy tales when one considers that at the time when fairy tales were beginning their rise in popularity the old woman was also becoming the scapegoat across Europe and in the American colonies. If there was a problem, it was far easier to lay it at the feet of someone who was in a societal and financial position where they were unable to help themselves. Cotton Mather and other writers of his time, in fact, “referred to accused witches in terms such as ‘an ignorant and scandalous old woman’ or a ‘lewd, ignorant, considerably aged woman’” (Karlsen 69). The accusations of witchcraft were more likely to be addressed to women over forty, i.e. those that were entering the age of menopause and were no longer reproductive. Also interesting is that older women who were still married or caring for children were less likely to be accused than those who were widowed (Karlsen 74). Thus it can be inferred that a woman’s status was more secure when she fit into the dominant culture as a man’s helpmate, while female independence was frowned on and punished.

ⁱⁱⁱ When the focus shifted to the paternity of children rather than the maternity, any woman who had passed the age of childbearing and sexual desirability to a male lost their social status in the male-dominated world. Barbara Walker states in *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power* that, “women after menopause no longer served the purposes of the patrilineal family system, which viewed women as breeding machines. (137)”

^{iv} Also on page 19 of *Feminist FairyTales*, Barbara Walker points out exactly how frightening such a power would seem when she states that “as for witchcraft, the last bastion of female spiritual power fell when the church declared its all-out war on witches, the name they

gave to rural midwives, healers, herbalists, counselors, and village wisewomen, inheritors of the unraveling cloak of the pre-Christian priestess. A queen who was also a witch would have been a formidable figure, adding political influence to spiritual mana. Snow White's stepmother therefore seems to me a projection of male jealousies.

^v In Kathleen Vejvoda's 2004 article, "'Too Much Knowledge of the Other World': Women and Nineteenth-Century Irish Folktales," she discusses the Irish folktale "The Crooked Back" in which an aging woman's place is strictly laid out. Any refusal to accept that position would meet with some type of punishment as Vejvoda lays out on page 47 – "Emphasizing her own antisocial and transgressive behavior on the night of the attack – her desire to indulge in private grief rather than to help the young. . . Barrett implicates herself in her fate. . . Now that she is a widow, Barrett is marked as no longer sexually desirable, and the process of de-sexualizing her is itself described as a kind of sexual violation. She is punished for her jealousy of the young and for dwelling on memories of her courtship with her late husband."

^{vi} One might suspect that female beauty was really a larger issue for men than for women, because male sexual response depends to a considerable degree on visual cues. Placing each "fair lady" (or anything else) somewhere on an arbitrary hierarchal scale seems to be a male idea. Women may recognize a thousand different types of beauty without having to make them compete. (Walker, FFT, 19)

^{vii} In *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power*, on page 140-141 Barbara Walker talks about aging women and sexuality saying: "The woman over thirty has been annihilated. Though the products for sale include many aimed directly at the aging woman, such as cosmetics to make her look more sexy (that is, younger), women are permitted to be sexual only at a certain time of life, and the sensuality of mature – and certainly of aging women has been perceived as grotesque, threatening and inappropriate. It is instructive to analyze what men define as appropriate for a woman to do or be. Postmenopausal sexuality would naturally be seen as inappropriate in a society that viewed women as baby-making machines. Only a few centuries ago in history, male arbiters of morality in our culture insisted that the sexuality of older women was not only inappropriate, but an indication of profound evil, inspired by the devil himself.

^{viii} As Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out in *Vindication on the Rights of Women* little girls learn from example what is necessary for them to achieve the ideals of beauty particular to their time and generation: To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! the limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves. As for Rousseau's remarks, which have since been echoed by several writers, that they have naturally, that is since birth, independent of education, a fondness for dolls, dressing, and talking – they are so puerile as not to merit a serious refutation. That a girl, condemned to sit for hours together listening to the idle chat of weak nurses, or to attend her mother's toilet, will endeavor to join the conversation, is, indeed, very natural; and that she will imitate her mother and aunts, and amuse herself by adorning her lifeless doll, as they do in dressing her, poor innocent babe! is

undoubtedly a most natural consequence. . . Nor can it be expected that a woman will resolutely endeavor to strengthen her constitution and abstain from enervating indulgences, if artificial notions of beauty, and false descriptions of sensibility, have been early entangled with her motives of action. . . Genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection. . . women are everywhere in this deplorable state. . . Taught from their infancy that beauty is women's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison. (Wollstonecraft, 55-57).

^{ix} Signs of old womanhood are not supposed to be seen. Women are socially and professionally handicapped by wrinkles and gray hair in a way that men are not. A multibillion-dollar "beauty" industry exploits women's well-founded fear of looking old. This industry spends megafortunes to advertise elaborately packaged, but mostly useless products, by convincing women that their natural skins are unfit to be seen in public. Every female face must be resurfaced by a staggering variety of colored putties, powders, and pastes. Instead of aging normally through their full life cycle, women are constrained to create an illusion that their growth process stops in the first decade or two of adulthood. (Walker, TC:WWP, 31)

^x As Susan Bordo states: Cher is typical here; her various surgeries have gradually replaced a strong, decidedly (if indeterminately) "ethnic" look with a much more symmetrical, delicate, Anglo-Saxon version of beauty. She also looks much younger at forty-six than she did at forty, as do most actresses of her generation, for whom face-lifts are virtually routine. These actresses, whose images surround us on television and in videos and films, are changing cultural expectations of what women "should" look like at forty-five and fifty. This is touted in the popular culture as a liberating development for older women; in the nineties, it is declared, fifty is still sexy. But in fact Cher, Jane Fonda, and others have not made the aging female body sexually more acceptable. They have established a new norm – achievable only through continual cosmetic surgery – in which the surface of the female body ceases to age physically as the body grows chronologically older. (Bordo 26)

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